

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

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Ok, could you state your name and where you lived before the start of the war.

My name is Evelyn or Evelyn [stresses the long 'e'] Ramseyer and before the war, my family and I lived in Enfield, Middlesex.

And what did you do at the start of the war? What was your role?

I was fifteen and I was still at school and I do remember all the ack ack guns and the searchlights and the bombing, although in Enfield, we did have obviously not the intense bombing of London, naturally, but we did have the occasion where there used to be, what they call parachute mines.

And I believe you joined the Wrens at some point during the war?

Oh yes, well this was my great opportunity, I thought, to get into something exciting in my life and so I decided to volunteer for the Navy. I was told it was very difficult because they were a bit snooty in those days and you were supposed to have had an uncle or somebody who was an admiral but I didn't have those but anyway, I went breezing up there and because I'd heard about this Wren M.T. rider, sorry dispatch rider, in Plymouth who had done the most amazing things, I thought 'That's what I want to do.' So when I went for the interview, and these Wren officers, I didn't know who they were, their official naval ranks

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were and I said, 'Can I be an M.T. driver?' and they said, 'Well no, I'm so sorry, we don't think you've had sufficient experience.' So I said, 'Well, I'd like to be a dispatch rider then please.' And to my astonishment, they said 'Can you ride a horse?' and 'Can you ride a bicycle?' [giggles] I'd never heard of anything so silly so of course I said, 'Yes of course'. So I was in as a dispatch rider, can you believe it? So on August the nineteenth, 1942 I reported at Mill House, which was nearby Enfield funnily enough, where the Wrens were training. We were told that we had to be probationers for two weeks in these awful sort of uniform thing, it was, not a service uniform and we had to scrub floors and all sorts of things for two weeks but what I did like, and I've always liked, was the marching up and down and then if you didn't like it, you could say, 'Could I go home please?' which was ridiculous isn't it? And if they didn't like you, you would get booted out as well. Anyway so then I proceeded on and there were just three of us who were going to be trained as dispatch riders and then we, the three of us, went into some, well it was actually, digs of course a Wrenery in Earle's Court. And then we had to catch a train, a bus, no it wasn't it was a tram every morning to The Old Kent Road where we reported to these, what were N.F.S. in the war, National Fire Service. And there were three of them there and they had to train us to ride these motorbikes round and round these cinder tracks. Well, none of us knew what the heck we were doing and these were very heavy 500cc Royal Enfield motorbikes and if they fell over, you simply couldn't pick them up. Then we went round and round the cinder track for about a week I think, and then we went out onto the road and, it's extraordinary because we were never told what happened if you got into a tram track 'cause if you got into a tram track, you couldn't get out and you could end up at the terminus which would be a big of a mistake for a start. And then at one point, I persuaded them if we could go all the way to my home on Enfield, The Ridgeway, Enfield and to my astonishment that's what we did in a sort of motorcycle, what's the word, group anyway and we [laughs], my parents must have had a fit! So then having passed that, which was pretty silly really again 'cause that was at Blackheath and this was like a green triangle or whatever it was in the middle and, I mean, the traffic, nothing like it is now, and individually, the three of us would go round and round and round this and obviously there'd be a bloke in the middle who was a test motorcyclist or something because to my astonishment, we passed and that was our training, no mechanical training, nothing. What are we, eighteen years old?

00:05:23

- Going for an interview as a dispatch rider
- Sent to Mill House for WREN training
- Going through motorbike test

So how come you moved to Hampshire?

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Ah, well, that, when I moved to Hampshire, that was in 1943 after I was in, dispatch riding in, first of all in Grimsby, which I hated, and then in London in Horse Guards Parade and then in, round about February 1943, I was able to persuade them to be on four wheels instead of two and I passed the driving on lorries and things and first of all ended up in Portsmouth barracks for six weeks or something, and then finally down in Hampshire and this was all part of, well I didn't know at the time, but I found myself being one of the Wren driver at a small part of what was HMS Turtle, HMS Turtle being the major Naval and Royal Marine base in Hamworthy and this particular small off shoot was Upper Parkston in this particular place that was, according to what I was told at the time, called The Sunshine Babies Home which was for little blind babies but apparently, at some point, the Navy had requisitioned it and we were there with a place for a lot of sailor boys to come there before they went on to the big camp. And there we were three drivers, if I remember correctly, one of whom was a Marine driver, and I lived in a Wrenery in Mount Road, I remember it so well, which is a cul-de-sac in Upper Parkstone. I've been to see it once since, of course, just an interest since I live down here and so then we at that point would be driving from Poole Station, with the sailor boys and their kit bags, going to the main camp or we would be going to Blandford to pick up stores or we would be going to Portland to pick up stores and generally, although we didn't have three tonne lorries there (we did in the major camp) we had smaller vehicles running the, oh gosh what's, the officers and so forth and it's interesting because I do remember the name of the Commander in charge that was there and it was a very small area, was Commander Hibbs and, of course, in this area, down here in New Milton, I think, there's a big place isn't there, with something to do with the Hibbs family and I often think there must have been some, some relationship there. I always remember that in the regulating office there, we had this lovely, what was his name? I remember his name was **Mugridge** and he was a lovely man who was a Naval man in the First World War, in between the two wars, he was one of the toll collectors of the Clifton Suspension Bridge and he came back into the Navy in the Second World War, I don't know how old he was because I was a kid and to me, he looked, you know, well he was, he was lovely and then we had a Leading Seaman who was also in the Regulating office, equally as lovely, equally as ex-First World War and we were a happy little group there actually. And then of course, that became closed down once the big camp was open, sorry, once the big camp was preparing for D-Day and so then we all moved down to the big camp. It may be of interest, I don't know, but in the smaller off shoot of HMS Turtle, we had in the back, in the area in the grounds, in the grounds area, amongst the trees, an assault course, only a small one, and this was to keep the sailor boys on their toes and keep them fit and one Saturday I was on duty and as typically me, I was a bit fed up, a bit bored and so one of the sailor boy, 'Go on, have a go,' he said and I did and then I fell in this pit [laughs] and injured my back and ended up in Poole hospital. Anyway, that's all part of that.

00:10:20

- A dispatch rider in Grimsby then on Horse Guards Parade, then Portsmouth and

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finally in Hampshire (for HMS Turtle)

- Driving sailors to and from the stations and collecting stores

So Evelyn, when you got leave, what did you do normally?

You mean during time off? Well, when we had shore leave, so called, and we had our passes and we had to go out, usually we went to Bournemouth and wandered about a little bit and had some coffee somewhere and, I do remember, what was he called? The **Lucalous** Restaurant, that's right, **Lucalous**, used to be, I think where the pavilion is now and that was about it, really, I mean there was nothing in the camp itself, unless some of the girls and boys went out and about together, probably they did. I must sound very boring but I don't think I did [giggles].

And were you here throughout the war? Were you here right up until VE Day? In the Forest? Were you down here?

Oh yes, yes, I mean I wasn't demobbed until April '46 to be exact, yes, so that obviously went for almost a year on.

And did you spend VE Day here? What was that like?

Ah, I see what you're saying. VE Day, well, I suppose so, I mean, it does, I think, oh yes, that's right we were, we had, I do beg your pardon, we had this wonderful marching, the whole of the Wrens and all the Navy personnel, there was the Chief Officer of the Navy, what was his name? And the Mayor and everybody standing there up on the plinth and we were all marching past, down past what is now the pavilion and that was a very proud moment I remember, yes. It's very, it's a very proud thing to be part of a service in the war, even though you might have thought what you did was infinitesimal compared to, but it was all part of it, that's what we Wrens were there for, to take some of the load off the men and the same in the ATS and any of the other women's services. And so that was it, I mean I can't remember any sort of great hurraing and yelling and shrieking and yelling because we obviously would have all gone back to camp.

And how long after VE Day were you still here? Or were you demobbed straight away?

Well, you weren't demobbed really until the, I mean I had my demobbed papers, 'till the time was right. You were given the opportunity to do some training of some kind if you wished, in order to prepare you for civvy life so I didn't do that, no. I often regret it and of course, the interesting thing is Wren drivers did not go abroad, where other services did, like the ATS, I believe and the WAF drivers and, but we did not for some reason, I don't quite know why that was.

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Did you ever drive a lorry again after the war?

No, but I would just like to say how I used to love doing this, when we had to collect Naval personnel from Poole Station, and maybe I got a bit cocky 'cause I've told my family about this and they think, 'Oh, not again!' but we would, I, because you'd be on your own anyway, you'd reverse your lorry down past, in the sidings to where all the sailor boys were with their kit bags, in reverse, so you'd have the door open, you'd have the engine ticking over, you'd have it in gear, reverse, you'd have your foot on the accelerator, your other foot on the outside footstep thing and you had to use your mirror to do all this, you know, reversing and I used to think that was brilliant, to get it right down and pick up the sailor boys and then drive them into the big camp.

Keywords:

- Going for an interview as a dispatch rider
- Sent to Mill House for WREN training
- Going through motorbike test
- A dispatch rider in Grimsby then on Horse Guards Parade, then Portsmouth and finally in Hampshire (for HMS Turtle)
- Driving sailors to and from the stations and collecting stores
- During 'shore leave' she would wander around Bournemouth
- No real camp entertainment
- Marching on VE Day, very proud moment
- Was able to reverse a big lorry to be able to pick up the sailors

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